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Review of "Aristotle and Modern Politics: The Persistence of Political Philosophy"

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Book Review

Aristotle and Modern Politics: The Persistence of Political Philosophy, Edited by Aristide Tessitore. University of Notre Dame Press. Notre Dame, Indiana. ISBN: 0-268-02013-2 437 pages, Preface 16 pages, includes index.

In the introduction to the collection of essays that compose *Aristotle and Modern Politics: The Persistence of Political Philosophy*, Aristide Tessitore outlines two reasons for the renaissance in Aristotelian studies and thus, the importance and timeliness of the book that he edits. The first is, according to Tessitore, a desire on the part of the proponents of liberalism to ward off the charges of ethical relativism. Charges that have become increasingly prevalent in light of the success and popularity of the political theory of John Rawls, articulated in his work, *A Theory of Justice*. The ideas developed by Rawls continue to stoke the controversy between proponents of liberalism and the defenders of communitarian views. This controversy not only provides the background for this collection of essays but, Tessitore argues, the background for the modern political debate. Modern political theorists in both the communitarian and liberal camps have attempted to use Aristotle's theories to lend support to their commitments. The communitarians jump on Aristotle's description of man as a natural political animal and the impossibility of viewing people as unencumbered "thin" selves, to use the terminology of Michael Walzer. The proponents of liberalism hope to incorporate Aristotle's teleology and conception of the universal good life for human beings to defend themselves against the relativist charge,

The second reason for the awakened interest in Aristotelian studies is as an insight on how to incorporate theory and practice. The schism between theory and practice was especially acute, Tessitore contends, in Germany after World War II, and is demonstrated in the writings of Max Weber. Weber, making a distinction between facts and values, contends that there is no rational way of arbitrating between values and therefore, that there is no solution to the problem of practical judgment. In response to Weber's pessimism regarding the future of practical philosophy, a number of German philosophers and émigrés, such as Hannah Arendt, began to look more closely for a solution in Aristotelian thought and have increased Aristotle's relevance in contemporary political debates.

This collection of essays is broken down into four constitutive parts; (1) The Problem of Political Community (2) The Possibilities and Limitations of Virtue in Politics (3) The Relationship between Law, Economics and Politics (4) The Foundations of Political Theory and Practice. In this review, I will examine one article from each of the four sections in the hope of providing an overview of the project embarked upon in this anthology and its strengths and weaknesses.

In Section 1, "The Problem of Political Community." Bernard Yack contributes an article entitled "Community: An Aristotelian Social Theory." Yack has two objectives in this article; the first is to

demonstrate that Aristotle cannot be properly described as a communitarian and therefore, should not be appropriated by them in a justification of their views. The second is to describe the unique perspective that Aristotle can contribute given his positioning outside of the contemporary debate.

It may seem, Yack would concede, that Aristotle could be classified under the communitarian heading; a more careful review of the *Politics* will demonstrate substantial differences between Aristotle's views of community and those espoused by modern communitarians in the contemporary debate. The differences between Aristotle's and the contemporary communitarian views can be defined as follows: The first difference is that Aristotle has a much broader definition of community than most contemporary theorists. For Aristotle, men are communal animals as well as political animals and thus, man's political activity is only one aspect of his communal nature. Men are naturally disposed to develop and maintain a wide number of communities, reflecting all of the shared goods and pursuits, not merely just the political goods and activities that they share.

The second difference is that the Aristotelian conception of community is not a form of communion, collective identity or a general will, contrary to the views of modern communitarians. The community for Aristotle, according to Yack, is more of a framework in which people engage in social activities rather than an ideal of solidarity. Finally, community, for Aristotle, is characterized by both friendship and justice. These terms have a different connotation for modern readers than they did for Aristotle, Yack asserts, and this is something to be cognizant of when reading his works. However, most importantly, they have different consequences for Aristotle than those predicted by modern communitarians. Friendship for Aristotle, according to Yack, is characterized by the disposition of human beings to develop a sense of concern for those individuals with whom they share goods. These goods could be shared political goods, pursuit of household goods or the goods that are jointly pursued in economic exchange. Depending on the sorts of goods that are jointly pursued, these friendships could have a transient shallow quality or they could be deeper and long lasting, but friendship is not limited to political activity and does not result in a collective identification. Instead, Aristotle's definition of friendship breaks down the dichotomy between altruism and self-interest that is both implicit and explicit in communitarian writings. It is possible, and even natural, to cultivate friendship even in economic exchanges, which are typically considered to be driven primarily by self-interested concerns. Justice for Aristotle, according to Yack, is more complex than friendship and is a disposition to demand that others conform to what we believe are appropriate standards of behavior. Justice does not develop naturally, although we have a natural capacity to set standards and in this way justice differs from friendship. Against the communitarians, Yack contends, Aristotelian justice serves as a bond between people in a community rather than dissolving differences between people and forming a collective identity or general will. Finally, Aristotelian justice does not demand that any particular standard be established or a certain regime put into place.

The second point that Yack develops in his article is that because of Aristotle's positioning outside of the modern debate, he is in the position to offer a unique perspective on both the merits of the debate and the communitarian approach in general. Yack argues that an Aristotelian analysis reveals two deficiencies in the dichotomous approach taken by modern political theorists. The first is that they generally possess overly simplistic notions about the pre-modern order, including Aristotle, and this blocks them from benefiting from his ideas and approach. The second is that there is a level of abstractness in their analysis which prevents the modern theorists from appreciating the nuances of the real social environment. Regarding the communitarian approach, Yack claims that Aristotle is able to advance and defend the

most sensible of the communitarian hypothesis, which is that people are shaped by their social interactions, without embracing the more radical and, Yack would assert, indemonstrable claims, such as their claim that liberalism threatens both individual integrity and the social order.

Yack offers an interesting and persuasive argument that Aristotle cannot be properly claimed by the communitarians, which is a beneficial service given the clear appropriation of his works by several communitarian theorists.

In Section 2, “The Possibilities and Limitations of Virtue in Politics”, Charles Pinches incorporates several seemingly disparate strains of thought in his contribution “Liberalism’s Need for Virtue and Christian Theology.” Pinches, whose background is in theology, examines the question of whether liberalism and virtue are compatible. Pinches uses Peter Berkowitz’s book *Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism* as his springboard and develops a three point argument to demonstrate that Berkowitz’ project will ultimately fail. The first reason is that Berkowitz sidesteps the precise issue that Aristotle, and later Aquinas, spent so much time developing, which is the connection between the virtues and a conception of a good life. This conception of the good life for man is rooted in a teleological understanding of human nature, specifically, that all human beings have an end and the virtues are required to help us to achieve this end. Berkowitz wants to divorce virtue from its relationship with human nature and in so doing, according to Pinches, ends up with a rudderless and essentially empty concept. The second reason is that Berkowitz, along with the founders of liberalism such as Mill and Kant, *motivationalized* virtue. This “motivationalization” is a result of the divorce of virtue from a coherent conception of human nature and the good life. Virtue functions as an instrument to “motivate” us to behave correctly, but virtues are not apart of any inquiry into what is good behavior. In other words, virtues can help you do what you are supposed to do, but they cannot inform you what that is. Finally, Berkowitz, recognizing the vacuum his theory creates and admitting that Western society lacks the requisite virtues that liberalism needs to maintain itself, suggests that as a liberal society we “outsource” our virtues. Berkowitz recommends the Christian church as a possible provider of liberal society needed virtues. Pinches rejects Berkowitz’ suggestion for two reasons; the first is that virtues are not easy to acquire (a subtle hit at what Pinches believes to be Berkowitz’ capitalistic mentality). The second reason is that if individuals began to acquire virtues from an outside source, they may also acquire ideas about human nature and the good life that are incompatible with liberalism.

Pinches, however, provides a solution in the face of Berkowitz’ defeat. What is needed, Pinches asserts, is a liberal religion. Pinches refers to Richard Rorty’s *Achieving Our Country* as an example of the sort of thing that he is talking about. According to Pinches, Rorty tells us a story about liberalism that includes a rich history and has had a profound effect on the lives of people who have participated in and benefited from the application of its principles. Not since Whitman and Dewey, Pinches states, has there been such a strong proponent for a civil religion. Rorty’s starting point, a particular place and time, will enable him to develop a concept of the good life that was missing in the founders’ of liberalism abstract theories. It is this contextual “place from somewhere” which will allow Rorty to develop the virtues and ground them in a conception of the good life.

In Section 3, “The Relationship between Law, Economics and Politics,” Jill Frank also incorporates several diverse strands of thought in her article, “Integrating Public Good and Private Right: The Virtue of Property,” comparing and contrasting the views of a contemporary Supreme Court Justice, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and Aristotle on the public and private nature of property. Frank wants to establish a view of private property that integrates the notion of private right and public good. She

contends that property needs to be treated not only as an exchange value (as it is in contemporary liberal society), but that it also needs to be treated as a use-value, a use value that is bound to the virtues of citizenship. Frank develops her claim through tracing, in reverse chronological order, the views of various august individuals on property until she arrives at Aristotle, whose theory, she believes, can fill in the missing pieces of the other theories that she describes.

Frank examines Aristotle's writings on property in the *Politics* and makes three claims about his views on property; the first is that property is not merely an exchange value for Aristotle, but it has a use-value as well. The second is that there is substantial continuity between the private practices of the home and the social practices of public life. Finally, property is both inherently private and inherently public. Indeed, this can be shown in the definition of property that Frank attributes to Aristotle which is "holding things as one's own for common use". Frank then turns to Aristotle to resolve the question raised by both Jefferson and Madison of how virtue and property are connected. In a rather confusing account, Frank develops an analogy between holding and using one's property and holding and using virtue. Frank correctly states that virtue for Aristotle consists both of habit (holding) and action (using) and that these are both necessary conditions for virtuous behavior to occur; acting well is dependent on good habits and good habits are dependent on acting well. These two components are in a dynamic and reinforcing relationship. Frank puts this analogy to heavy use, stating Aristotle speaks of virtue as a kind of property (holding or a possession) and further, that property and virtue are intrinsically bound up with each other, the use and holding of property requires virtue and virtue calls for property. It is an interesting approach; however, it is difficult to follow because of the different meanings of the term "property" that Frank utilizes. It becomes more confusing when Frank tries to argue that property is both a characterological and an external good (contrary to Aristotle's statement in the *Nicomachean Ethics*). Again, her argument and bold interpretation are difficult to follow. She concludes by stating the Aristotle is able to explain the apparent paradox in considering property as a private right and public good. However, I would have liked to see this argument more fully developed.

Section 4; "The Foundations of Political Theory and Practice." In his article "Aristotelian Autonomy," Frank Miller lays out his argument that Aristotle provides a view of autonomy that differs from those offered by Hume and Kant and actually cuts a middle path between them. Miller spends the bulk of this article trying to figure out the role that the desires and reason play in human action (locomotion). He focuses specifically on the text of Aristotle's *de Anima* III and argues that a careful reading of the text will demonstrate that Aristotle is committed to the rule of reason in the human soul, rather than the rule of the passions a la Hume. Miller argues that the *de Anima* and its companion text in *Nicomachean Ethics* should be understood as stating that reason determines what the good end is for a virtuous human person in a particular circumstance (practical wisdom) and the desire for this good end (or means to a good end) instigates the movement towards object. According to Miller's reading, desire and reason both play essential parts in human action or movement, but it is evident that in a virtuous individual, reason plays the commanding role. Because of this interpretation, it is possible to understand Aristotle's theory of education not as producing well conditioned individuals, but producing autonomous individuals who are able to use reason to choose the best action. An interesting question that Miller does not address is whether all individuals are autonomous? If autonomy is somehow connected with virtue and it seems clear that all individuals are not virtuous, the implication is that most individuals are not autonomous and this could have serious effects on Miller's subsequent argument for the ideal of political autonomy and the ideal city-state. According to Miller, the politically autonomous state requires that individuals be autonomous, that is, that they are both able to rule and be ruled by others. This leads to the clear

implication that only a few individuals will be apart of the ruling coalition, while the rest will be instructed by the laws on how to become more autonomous/more virtuous.

Miller is correct that Aristotle offers an account of autonomy that sounds more intuitively plausible than the more extreme versions offered by Kant and Hume, with their emphasis on reason and desire respectively. However, these theorists do not run into the charge of elitism and paternalism the way that Aristotle so clearly does. An interesting project would be one that considers whether Aristotle has any coherent way around this objection.

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